Lafayette Historical Society
POST OFFICE BOX 133 LAFAYETTE, CALIF. 94549

President:
Bill Somerton
284-9785

NEWSLETTER

Lafayette, California | January, 1998 | Vol. 25, No. 1

ELAM BROWN's 1st HOUSE SITE PLAQUE DEDICATION FEBRUARY 7th!

The opening celebration of the Sesquicentennial year (150th anniversary of Lafayette) will be the dedication of the Elam Brown monument February 7th at the site on Happy Valley Road. The plaque to be dedicated says it all:

> FIRST SETTLEMENT OF LAFAYETTE
> FEBRUARY 7, 1848
>
> IN THIS LOCATION ON THE RANCHO ACALANES, ELAM AND MARGARET ALLEN BROWN FOUNDED LAFAYETTE BY BUILDING THEIR FIRST HOUSE, A CRUDE AFFAIR CONSTRUCTED WHILE MRS. BROWN PREPARED DINNER. IN 1849 THEY ERECTED A HORSE-POWERED GRIST MILL ACROSS THE ROAD.
>
> ELAM BROWN DIED IN LAFAYETTE ON AUGUST 10,1889 AT THE AGE OF 92.
>
> **Erected by the Lafayette Historical Society on the occasion of Lafayette's sesquicentennial February 7, 1998**

The dedication ceremony will be at 1 pm on the site at 3972 Happy Valley Road, near Panorama Drive. Parking will be available at Happy Valley School with signs to the dedication site.

The dedication ceremony will be followed by a gala Party-at-the-Barn at Sammann's barn next to the Happy Valley School. The program will include music, prizes and refreshments. Who knows? Elam Brown may be present to tell his story (as recreated by Ray Peters). A special commemorative postal cancellation will be available at the Lafayette Post Office 9 - 12 the morning of the dedication.

All Society members and Lafayette residents are specially invited to attend this fun-filled and educational program.

President's Message

We wish all our members and friends a Happy and Prosperous New Year. This year will be filled with many exciting events as we celebrate Lafayette's Sesquicentennial (150th anniversary of the founding of what was to become Lafayette).

We ask for your support of the many programs included in this great celebration. The first of these events is the dedication of the marker at the site of founder Elam Brown's first home on the present Happy Valley Road. Not only do we ask for your presence and support of these events, we need your help on the several committees and sub-committees responsible for the arrangements and conduct of the events. Please refer to the listing of the committees shown elsewhere in the newsletter and contact the person responsible for the activities of interest to you.

Working together, we can make the Sesquicentennial celebration an event we will be proud of and will long remember. We hope that the lasting result of the celebration will be a much needed new library which will include an Historical Museum.

—by Bill Somerton, President

It's SESQUI Time!

As Bill Somerton mentioned in his piece above, 1998 is Lafayette's Sesquicentennial year. At the top of this page you'll see the logotype designed to commemorate the occasion. We will use it frequently on these pages this year.

Here's a list of Sesqui Events planned for 1998:

February 7, 1998—Dedication of Elam Brown monument on Happy Valley Road - Program at Happy Valley School.

April 23 and 25, 1998—Dedication of Pony Express Monument on Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Moraga Road.

Sesquicentennial Lafayette® Sesquicentennial
1848 — 1998
150th Anniversary

May16, 1998—Westival at Lafayette School.

May 17, 1998*—Concert at the Res - sponsored by the Lafayette Rotary Club.

July 4, 1998—4th at the Park - off St. Mary's Road.

July 12, 1998*—Concours D'Elegance - at Acalanes High School.

September 19 & 20, 1998—Art and Wine Festival - Plaza Park.

October, 1998**—Acalanes Homecoming Parade - Mt. Diablo Blvd.

October, 1998***—Sesquicentennial Celebration.

October 25, 1998—Lafayette Reservoir Run.

* Tentative dates

** Specific dates to be announced.

*** Dates and activities to be announced.

Elam Brown Writes Home

The following extracts are from a letter written by Elam Brown to his brother-in-law Samuel Peck. Dated April 1, 1848, the letter did not reach Peck in Sunbury, Ohio, until June, 1849:

"California has the best climate, or as good as any in the world. At this time your best stall-fed beef can not equal our beef. On the California plains the quantity of fat cattle would surprise you. The grass, oats, and clover everywhere raised are knee high and very thick. Oats

and clover are native growth here, as your parsley and pig weed in Ohio.

"Hogs do very well here, and but few are raised, and they are but little used except for making soap, and there is a root that is a substitute for that article which supplies fully one-half the demand.

"Farmers have little fencing. Timber is scarce in many places. The people are idle. There is no regular price for property. Horses are from five to fifty dollars.

"Saddlery would not sell here. California saddles are all in vogue, and as different from ours as a horse is from a camel. Boots are from $4 to $6—first quality $10; brogans $2.50, finer quality $3.50 to $4. Shoes should be quick sales, also strong pantaloons.

"I have a thousand dollars due me on my farm in Platte in 1848. I will enclose an order on Messrs. Collier & Vineard in Platte for the payment, to be invested in goods and shipped as you think best. I have a draft in Oregon on the Bank of America. I have ordered it here, and it will probably be cashed at a discount if it gets here. My purse is drawn low but I will try to float 'till help comes. By all means send a good surveyor's compass and chain, ball and socket.

"The town of San Francisco at or near the entrance to the bay is the best place of business in California and will always be so. Monterey, 150 miles south—is next in size, but far behind in local advantages.

"There are valleys and fertile hills enough here to support a powerful population, but the natives will never do any good. They have the best of the country covered with their grants, and appear determined to hold on. They will part with anything but land.

"Money had been very plenty since I have been here, but is now becoming scarce. I am—unable to tell whether it will get better or worse. Should Uncle Sam hold the country, (God forbid they should not) it will soon rise to note. If not the country, myself, and all Americans are ruined.

"Please write me by the mail. I am informed there will be a regular mail via Panama established and in operation this spring.

"May the God of Heaven ever bless you is the prayer of your affectionate brother.

Elam Brown."

—(Excerpted from SOME CALIFORNIA POPPIES & EVEN A FEW MOMMIES, Dorothy Mutnick, 1980 by Ray Peters.)

Dues Are Due

It's that time of year again, time to send a check to the Society for that amazingly small pittance we call dues. Please cut out the Member Information form on the inside back cover of this newsletter, and mail it with your check in the envelope we've included inside this newsletter.

Be sure to let us know which activities you'd like to be helping with by checking them off on the Member Info form.

—by Ollie Hamlin

In MEMORIUM

Edith Ann Viguers, one of the earliest members of the Society, and a very active one as well. November 10, 1997.

Be A Director!

From time to time, vacancies occur on the Society's Board of Directors. Call Bill Somerton to have your name considered for the next opening.

Old Betsy Getting Better!

If progress in the restoration project can be measured by removal and rebuilding, then real progress has been made in the last few months. Again it is because of the activities of new helpers. Two hard working and knowledgeable friends of the Lafayette Historical Society have been added to the restoration team. Both are owners of Model T's and both have restored their own vehicles. Lee Volguardensen and John Callio were asked if they would be interested in helping with the project and both said YES. That was the beginning and the start of further removal of some of OLD BETSY's parts.

John and Lee began by visiting the fire engine and deciding what could and should be done. Within a few visits the firewall, wiring and windshield were removed and restored parts were ordered or rebuilt. The windshield has been rebuilt with new safety glass and a repainted frame. The fire wall is being replaced with a new sheet of wood. The complete wiring harness is being assembled. A broken part of the starter has been replaced. A list of needed items has been made and parts are ordered. All of this has happened in a few weeks before the Holiday Season and other time commitments interfered with John's and Lee's activities. In the next few weeks all of the parts that are being separately restored will be brought back to the project and reassembled on the fire engine.

The objective is to get the engine and brake system back into operation so that Old Betsy will be available for self transportation to Lafayette events. With the help of Lee and John that will happen. The next objective is to get other restored parts assembled on the fire engine for its use with the Elam Brown site celebration in February. With the skill and enthusiasm of Lee and John that will happen ON SCHEDULE.

More to follow with the next report including some background on these two new helpers to the project. Thanks again to Lee Volguardsen and John Callio.

—by George Wasson, Keeper of the Fire Engine

Lucky Store Historical Displays

During the Sesquicentennial year there will be a series of displays in Lucky's display booth on the outer west side of the store. These displays will cover historical events highlighted during the year.

The first display, featuring "The Heart of Lafayette—Plaza Park", will return later in the year. This display has been replaced by an Elam Brown display in preparation for the monument dedication on February 7th. This will be followed by a Pony Express display in preparation for the Pony Express monument dedication and program April 23 and 25.

You are invited to visit these displays, sponsored by the Lafayette Historical Society. Bring your friends. We might get some new members this way.

Lafayette - The Jewel of Diablo Valley

The history of Lafayette, California is like a microcosm of the Golden State itself. Both are celebrating 150 years of existence - Sesquicentennial!

The area which now encompasses Lafayette was inhabited by members of the Bay Miwok tribe of Native Americans. This was an ideal area, as it is today, because of the temperate climate and the abundance of natural food. Sadly, all that remains of these kind and gentle people are a few broken arrowheads, pestle and mortars and crude tools. These people were put to work (in the service of God) by Spanish missionaries who brought with them illnesses for which the Indians had no immunity. Those who didn't die were driven out by the Yankee settlers.

In 1823, when Mexico took over control of what was to become California, some of the soldiers were granted land instead of money for their service. One of these, Candelero Valencia, asked General Vallejo for land he referred to as Rancho Los Sacalanes in honor of the Sakian In-

dians he had met at Mission Dolores. The general missed the first "S" in the name and recorded it as Rancho Acalanes, which it remains today. There were many other land grants in the area, parts of which are included in the present boundaries of Lafayette.

The Mexican land owners raised cattle, letting them roam free. Once a year they held a roundup of the cattle, sorted them by brands, slaughtered the excess and had a grand fiesta. Exports of hides and tallow netted the Mexican government about a million dollars a year.

The inevitable Yankee settlers arrived in the persons of the Elam Brown family. Elam Brown left St. Joseph, Missouri on May 1, 1846 in a wagon train, with Elam the wagon master, and arrived at Sutter's Fort on October 10 of the same year. They had crossed the Sierra just days before the ill-fated Donner party. Elam arrived in San Jose, joined the army and was involved in the defeat of the Mexican army. Later while cutting redwoods in the Oakland hills, he met William Leidesdorff who then owned Rancho Acalanes and learned that he wished to sell the property. Elam had married Margaret Allen, whose husband had died on the wagon train trip, and was able to "borrow" funds from her which she had brought in a clock case during the trip. Elam Brown purchased the property for $900. Mr. Leidesdorff threw in 300 head of cattle.

On February 7, 1848 the Elam Browns arrived at the site of their future home just off the present Happy Valley Road. It is reported that Elam and his sons built a lean-to as their first home as Margaret Brown prepared supper. A more substantial home was later built using timber they had brought from the Oakland hills. The first order of business was to plant grain because they knew it had to be in during the rainy season. The plantings were successful, but it was necessary to transport the grain to San Jose for milling, a journey of several days. The next year he purchased a horse-powered grist mill and installed it across the road. Business was so good that by 1853 he installed a steam-powered mill on the creek near the present First Street.

The real development of Lafayette as more than a farming village can probably be attributed to the logging of redwoods on the east side of the Oakland hills - present Canyon area. The logs were carried by oxcart to Pacheco - then a port - where they were loaded aboard steamers for San Francisco. On the way, Lafayette was a convenient overnight stopping place giving rise to the need for a hotel, bar, grocery and blacksmith shop. These developed along the present Golden Gate Way between First and Second Streets a rudimentary commercial district. The first hotel was built by Milo Hough in 1854 on Golden Gate Way at First Street. During the two years the hotel was in operation Hough became postmaster of what was known as the Acalanus Post Office.

In 1853, Benjamin Shreve, a Kentuckian gold seeker, was convinced by Elam Brown that school-teaching was a much more rewarding occupation. For $60 a month he taught school in a small school building near the commercial district. In 1855 he started a general merchandise store near the school. Two years later he became postmaster of LaFayette, after applying for the job in the name of Centerville, which was denied by the U.S. Postal Service.

The reason the commercial district developed on Golden Gate Way between the present First and Second Streets was because the road (trail) from Moraga cut across the present Lafayette School site, intersecting about at First Street. In 1860 Elam Brown realigned Moraga Road to its present location and the store and post office were moved near the corner of Moraga Road and Plaza Way. That building still stands and is now Handlebar and A-1 Photo Lab. The commercial district was now centered around the plaza. In 1864 Elam Brown deeded the plaza park property to the citizens of Lafayette to remain forever as a park. The park has shrunk in size over the years to its present configuration.

Redwood shipments through Lafayette ended in 1860. At that time the plaza area had a new hotel on the corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Blvd., and Peter Thomson's blacksmith shop across the street where the Bank of America is now located. In April 1860 the Pony Express used Lafayette as a change-of-horse station. This continued for about eighteen months.

There was no school in Lafayette after Shreve stopped teaching until it was restarted in 1860. By 1872 the school population warranted a new building which was built just west of the

present United Methodist Church on Moraga Road (schoolhouse #2 which was later moved to Mt. Diablo Blvd. and is now the Kilarney House). Jenny Bickerstaff, who was one of the best known graduates of the school, attended San Jose Normal School qualifying her to teach at Moraga School. She rode from her home in Lafayette to Moraga every day on her horse, sidesaddle. The third school was built in 1893 and is now incorporated into the Lafayette United Methodist Church building.

In 1885 fire destroyed the hotel on Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Blvd. as well as Elam Brown's grist mill. A new hotel was built on the same site but it was burned down in 1892 by a disgruntled patron. To make up for this loss, the Wayside Inn was built in 1894 and is presently owned and operated as a thrift shop by the Assistance League of Diablo Valley. Yet another hotel was built on the corner of Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Moraga Road by Phillip Lamp in 1900 but suffered the same fate as the others, having burned down in 1929.

In 1904 Robert McNeil purchased the Shreve general store and renamed it the Pioneer Market. That market was still in operation until the early 1950's. McNeil was responsible for erecting a fence around the plaza park to prevent the young men from racing their horses around the park, creating a dust cloud that permeated all the buildings in the area.

In the early 1920's, the commercial district started expanding to the west along Mt. Diablo Blvd. This expansion was fueled by several developments. In 1910 the first tunnel was built through the Oakland hills reducing travel time between the Bay Area and Lafayette significantly. It also made shipping of goods much faster and easier. Then in 1913 the Sacramento Northern Railroad started passenger service through Lafayette. (The right-of-way is now the Lafayette-Moraga Trail.) This service made it an easy commute from the Bay Area and Lafayette was headed towards becoming a "bedroom community". This also made it possible for high school students to travel easily from Lafayette to Mt. Diablo High in Concord. Although passenger service stopped in 1941, freight service continued until 1957.

Before Sacramento Northern passenger service was discontinued, the Bay Bridge and Caldecott Tunnel were in operation. This spurred the development of Lafayette. Also, the first units of Acalanes High School were completed and classes begun in 1940 so the need to travel to Concord disappeared. After World War II, growth of Lafayette spurted and serious traffic problems developed on Mt. Diablo Blvd. Completion of the Lafayette freeway bypass alleviated this problem but like Murphy's Law other traffic problems arose. Home developments to the south of Lafayette led to serious congestion on Moraga Road. Although the opening of BART helped the freeway traffic, it further exacerbated the traffic problems on Mt. Diablo Blvd.

Many other historic events could be cited. The Lafayette Town Hall was built in 1914 by the Lafayette Improvement Club. In the early days it was a popular center for dances that attracted people from many parts of the Bay Area. It was the center for public meetings where much of the input on governing the town took place. After incorporation of the city in 1968, the need of its use for this purpose declined and it is now leased to the Town Hall Theater of California for plays.

Over the years, Lafayette has grown into a sophisticated community with shopping centers and boutiques lining Mt. Diablo Blvd. Many plans are afoot for future developments including the BART block development, upgrading of shopping centers and a new library including a historical museum. Keeping up with the demands for public improvements is difficult in a no-tax city and with Proposition 13 in effect. However, the good people of Lafayette will find a way!

References:

Taken largely from a draft by Bill Wakeman

History of Contra Costa County by Slocum and Co.

La Fayette — A Pictorial History by Sandy Kimball

The Improvers of Lafayette by Andrew H. Young

Some California Poppies and Even a Few Mommies by Dorothy Mutnick

—condensed by Bill Somerton, President

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Lafayette Historical Society

MEMBER INFORMATION

(For multiple names/addresses, please photocopy this form.)

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Membership Categories and annual dues (please check one):

_____ Student membership $ 2.50
_____ Family membership $ 10.00
_____ Business membership $ 50.00
_____ Life membership $100.00

Make check payable to **Lafayette Historical Society** and mail to P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

DUES $_____
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Please indicate your areas of special interest:

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_____ LHS Online/Computers
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LHS CALENDAR

Elam Brown Homesite Dedication and Party-at-the-Barn

Date/Time	Saturday, February 7, 1998, 1 Pm
Place	Park at Happy Valley School, follow the signs.

Board of Directors Meeting—Open to all members

Date/Time	Tuesday, March 10, 1998, 7:30 Pm
Place	3468 Hamlin Rd. RSVP to 284-1287

Pony Express Marker Dedication and Program

Date/Time	Thursday, April 23, 1998, Dedication
Place	Mt. Diablo Blvd. at Moraga Rd.
Date/Time	Saturday, April 25, 1998, Program
Place	Methodist Church on Moraga Rd.

Annual Pot-Luck Dinner and Program

Date	Tuesday, May 12, 1998
Place	To be announced.

Deadline for LHS Newsletter Articles

Date	Monday, April 6, 1998
Send to:	willcuts@ccnet.com, or call 283-0706

For information on membership, contact Oliver Hamlin, 283-6822.

Lafayette Historical Society
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